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ABSTRACT

The attitudes of college freshmen toward older people were assessed in a 1979 study using the Situational Attitude Scale-Age. The same measure was used again in 1988 on a similar sample of freshmen. The combined samples consisted of 412 students, 51% female and 49% male. Results were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance at the .05 level with year (1979 vs 1988) and gender as main effects. In seven out of 10 of the situations, the samples responded differently depending on the form of the instrument that they received. Results indicate that older people are still not equally accepted in many situations. Suggestions for improved student education and programming are discussed. (Author)

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HAVE COLLEGE STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD OLDER PEOPLE CHANGED?

Susan J. Schwalb, William E. Sedlacek,
& Sharon M. Jones

Research Report # 4-89

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Summary

The attitudes of freshmen toward older people were assessed in a 1979 study using the Situational Attitude Scale- Age (SASA). This same measure was used again in 1988 on a similar sample of freshman. The combined samples consisted of 412 students; 51% female and 49% male. Results were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) at the .05 level with year (1979 vs. 1988) and gender as main effects. In seven out of ten of the situations, the samples responded differently depending on the form of the SAS that they received. The results indicate that older people are still not equally accepted in many situations. Suggestions for improved student education and programming are discussed.

In recent years, increased attention has been paid toward older people and their role in our society. Much of the discussion has focused on an increased sensitivity toward age issues. Yet popular media expose us to older people on a daily basis, representing them most often as negative and stereotypic. Older people are underrepresented in commercials and when they are used, they are portrayed as "young-old", rarely bald or wrinkled. When portrayed as characters, they are given nondescript roles. Only one percent of television portrayals provide an overt positive view of being old (Hiemstra, Goodman, Middlemiss, Vosco, & Ziegler, 1983).

The number of people in the 60+ age group in 1986 was 40 million, representing 17% of the U.S. population. This group has grown by 13% between 1980 and 1986 as compared to a growth rate of only 5% for people under 60 (Fowles, 1987). Increased representation of older people in our society has coincided with an increase in researching attitudes toward older people (Celio, Sedlacek, & Schlossberg, 1977; Peabody, & Sedlacek, 1982). As a result of the increased attention toward age issues, it is possible that age stereotyping has declined. It is also possible that it has merely become more difficult to document.

Prejudice toward older people has been studied in a variety of settings. Often in job interviewing situations, prejudiced attitudes are exposed. Gordon, Rozelle, and Baxter

(1988) had subjects rate male and female job applicants. The applicants were role-played unbeknown to the subjects. When subjects were held accountable for their impressions, they decreased their ratings of older applicants and increased their ratings of younger applicants. Similarly, Singer (1986) found that subjects rated a 55 year old man more negatively than they rated a 30 year old man on a variety of work dimensions in five different professions.

Further evidence exists for age-associated prejudice. In his review of the literature on perceptions of old people, McTavish (1971) found that they are generally viewed as ill, tired, mentally slower, not sexual, forgetful, withdrawn, unproductive, grouchy, and defensive. Kite & Johnson (1988) did a meta-analysis of the literature through 1985, and found that attitudes held toward 'older' people were more negative than attitudes toward young adults.

Concurrently we have experienced increased enrollment of older students on college campuses (Levin, 1988; Martin, 1988). Work done on college populations has also found negative attitudes toward older people. Peabody and Sedlacek (1982) used the Situational Attitude Scale to identify hidden attitudes of college students toward older people in a variety of situations. Their results indicated that the most negative attitudes were expressed in close social situations with older people. Academic situations yielded slightly less negative attitudes toward older people. Levin, (1988) found strong and

consistant age stereotyping by college students against older people when rating a specific male target.

With the increase in research on ageism, it has been more apparent that `older people´ is a difficult term to define. Celio, Sedlacek, and Schlossberg (1977) noted that this term does not refer to a unitary construct. Therefore research in this area becomes confusing in that it may not always be dealing with the same idea of older people. Typically terms such as `old´ and `elderly´ are not useful because they have varying connotations associated with them.

Also of concern is the limited scope of the research in this area. Research has involved small specific populations or has concerned negative attitudes in limited situations. If ageism is a widespread concern, than a broader look at the issue is necessary. For this reason, a study concerning how attitudes evolve over time is meaningful. A look at whether negative attitudes persist over time provides an understanding of how pervasive the problem of agesim is.

METHOD

The version of the SAS-A used in the present study is a revision of the original instrument (Celio, Sedlacek, & Schlossberg, 1977). Ten situations relevant to college student life were created. For each situation, ten bipolar sets of descriptive words follow. Students reacted to all ten pairs of words in each situation making a total of 100 responses. Two separate forms were developed (see Appendix).

The forms differed only on whether a specific age was attached to the situation. Form A was the control situation with no specific age mentioned. Form B was experimental in that a specific age was mentioned in each situation.

The data were collected in 1979 as part of a previous study (Peabody, & Sedlacek, 1982) and again in 1988. Data were collected during the summer freshman orientation program for both years. The total sample consisted of 412 students; 51% female, 49% male with a mean age of 18 years old. Forms were randomly assigned to students. Thus any difference in mean response would be due to the insertion of age in the situation since all other aspects of the measure and method were neutral.

Results were analyzed using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) at the .05 level with year (1979 vs. 1988) and gender as main effects.

RESULTS

The reliability of the SAS-A (coefficient alpha) ranged from .89 to .65 across the situations with a median reliability of .81. Table 1 shows the results of F tests by year, gender, and form. Table 2 shows the means for each of these situations by year, gender, and form. In the majority of situations (6 of 10 in 1979, 7 of 10 in 1988) students held negative attitudes toward the age specific 'older' people.

Year Effects

The three situations showed effects by year. Regardless of form or gender, students in 1988 tended to feel more positive toward situations 8 (breaking into line), 9 (applying for a job), and 10 (competition for a date) than did students in 1979.

Form Effects

In seven out of ten of the situations, the students responded differently depending on the form that they had. Six of these situations indicated that students had more negative attitudes toward older people: a new 50 year old roommate, a 35 year old blind date, a 50 year old lab partner, a 30 year old student trying out for intramurals, a 40 year old pledge of a sorority/fraternity, and a 30 year old study partner. Only in the situation of a 65 year old breaking into line, were attitudes more positive toward the older person.

Gender Effects

Gender differences were found in three situations. Females held more negative views toward being assigned a study partner and toward a blind date while males held more negative views of someone trying out for their intramural team.

Interaction Effects

Effects of Gender by Form were significant for two situations: a 40 year old pledges your fraternity or sorority and someone breaking into line at the movies. In the first situation, females were more positive than males when age was not noted, but when reacting to an older person pledging their fraternity/sorority, females responded more negatively than

males. In the neutral situation of having someone break into line at the movies, females were less tolerant than males. However, when the older person broke into line, females were more tolerant.

The interactions of Form by Year and Gender by Year were not significant.

DISCUSSION

Overall attitudes of college students toward older people were generally negative in both the 1979 and 1988 samples. Most situations found college students to have different attitudes toward older people than toward an age unspecified person. Students felt negatively toward older persons in academic situations (study group and lab partners) as well as in social situations. Only the situation of breaking in line resulted in more positive attitudes for older people, indicating that students felt that this situation was appropriate for a 65 year old. In the situations of orientation advisor and job applicant, attitudes did not differ for older people, perhaps indicating that age is not salient in these situations with the speicifc ages stated in the situations. While students in 1988 were more positive toward the situations regardless of form or gender, the differences on form and the lack of form by year interactions are the findings that lead us to conclude that students hold the same basically negative attitudes toward older people over the period studied.

Females differed from males in three of the social situations. This pattern seems to indicate that social norms are different for males and females. The groups had different situations that were significantly more negative for them. For example, females were more threatened by the blind date situation whereas males were more negative toward someone joining their intramural team.

The generally negative assesment of older people has implications for the college community as a whole. With the increased population of older college students on campus, every effort should be made to create an environment for `older' students that is at least equal to that of traditional college students. Amir (1969) in his summary of the literature on the effects of contact amoung different groups concludes that contact alone does not necessarily reduce prejudice. There must be some attempt to provide positive interactions in which both groups feel they have something to gain.

Though there is increased publicity and concern over the rights of `older' person's in our society, attitudes do not appear to be changing. Awareness of ageism alone without education or programing to increase sensitivity, as these results indicate, does not effect change. College communities need to make greater efforts to educate the general campus population about ageism through workshops and within regular coursework. Courses that view ageism as one of many `isms',

provide insight into the overall nature of prejudice and therefore enlighten students to the concerns of 'older' people as well as other oppressed groups. This approach has been shown to be effective in orientation programs (Sedlacek, Troy, & Chapman, 1976) and in classroom settings (Roper & Sedlacek, 1988).

Other concrete approaches to combatting 'isms' are found in Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) who outline a series of steps in dealing with prejudices. These steps include information, assessment of attitudes, role playing, examining sources of attitudes and generating experiences that reduce ageism such as maintaining a diverse student population to allow for natural contact amoung groups, exposing students to accomplished older persons to enhance an understanding of the potential of older people in our society, and hosting conferences and workshops on the subject allowing for follow-up sessions for student reactions to the programs. These kinds of active approaches must be employed if we would like to see college student attitudes improve toward 'older' people.

With most prejudices, people have the leisure of never having to confront their negative views. If they choose, they can avoid the issue forever. However, that we will all eventually age means that at some time in our lives, we will be forced to deal with the issues of aging. University

communities should help students confront their concerns about 'older' people since this is an issue for all students.

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Table 1

Probabilities of F values by Year, Form, and Gender
For Each SAS-A Situation

Situation *	Effects Significant **
1. new roomate	F
2. blind date	F, G
3. lab partner	F
4. orientation advisor	none
5. intramurals	F, G
6. new pledge	F, G X F
7. study partner	F, G
8. movie ticket line	Y, F, G X F
9. job competitor	Y
10. date competition	Y

* see Appendix for complete situations

** Y = year, F = form, G= gender

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations by Year, Form, and Gender
For SAS-A Situations

	1979													
	Form A						Form B							
*Item No.	Male		Female		Total		Male		Female		Total		Year Total	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1.	26.00	3.99	25.56	4.78	25.77	4.41	34.40	6.02	36.09	8.80	35.30	7.64	30.12	7.90
2.	23.57	4.82	25.62	5.98	24.64	5.53	30.62	6.55	32.03	7.80	31.38	7.29	28.14	7.29
3.	24.46	5.58	22.70	4.97	23.54	5.32	26.16	6.59	27.06	6.88	26.64	6.73	25.16	6.28
4.	25.55	4.17	25.29	4.53	25.40	4.34	24.18	5.41	24.70	6.52	24.46	6.01	24.91	5.28
5.	24.38	5.69	21.78	6.13	23.00	6.03	26.57	7.47	25.35	6.33	25.92	6.88	24.53	6.63
6.	24.70	5.76	20.80	5.54	22.67	5.95	29.41	9.29	30.38	8.29	29.93	8.73	26.48	8.36
7.	22.14	6.17	19.78	6.88	20.91	6.62	24.14	7.81	22.62	7.30	23.34	7.55	22.17	7.20
8.	38.25	6.01	39.26	5.17	38.78	5.58	39.80	6.81	36.18	7.48	37.87	7.37	38.30	6.57
9.	28.57	4.68	28.08	5.52	28.31	5.12	28.92	5.87	29.10	5.92	29.05	5.87	28.69	5.52
10.	37.13	7.06	37.74	7.69	37.45	7.36	36.40	9.90	36.88	7.48	36.65	8.65	37.03	8.05

* see Appendix for complete situations

Appendix

Instructions

This questionnare measures how people think and feel about a number of social and personal incidents and situations. It is not a test so there are no right or wrong answers. The questionnaire is anonymous so please DO NOT SIGN YOUR NAME.

Each item or situation is followed by 10 descriptive word scales. Your task is to select, for each descriptive scale, the rating that best described YOUR feelings toward the item.

Sample item: Starting school this fall

happy A B C D E sad

You would indicate the direction and extent of your feelings (e.g. you might select (B) by indicating your choice (B) on your response sheet by blackening in the appropriate space for that word scale. DO NOT MARK ON THE BOOKLET. PLEASE RESPOND TO ALL WORD SCALES.

Sometimes you may feel as though you had the same item before on the questionnare. This will not be the case, so DO NOT LOOK BACK AND FORTH through the items. Do not try to remember how you checked similar items earlier in the questionnaire. MAKE EACH ITEM A SEPARATE AND INDEPENDENT JUDGEMENT. Respond as honestly as possible without puzzling over individual items. Respond with your first impression whenever possible.

Situations

Form A	Form B
1. You meet your new roommate.	You meet your new 50-year-old roommate.
2. Your blind date turns out to be a freshman.	Your blind date turns out to be a 30-year-old freshman.
3. You begin work with your lab partner in a course.	You begin work with your 50-year-old lab partner in a course
4. You meet your freshman orientation advisor.	You meet your 40-year-old freshman orientation advisor.
5. A student tries out for your intramural team.	A 30-year-old student tries out for your intramural team.
6. A student pledges your fraternity/sorority.	A 40-year-old student pledges your fraternity/sorority.
7. A student from one of your courses asks to study with you.	A 30-year-old student from one of your courses asks to study with you.
8. You are standing in line for movie tickets and someone breaks in line ahead of you.	You are standing in line for movie tickets and a 65-year-old person breaks in line ahead of you.
9. You are applying for a highly competitive job and you meet your new major competitor before the final interview.	You are applying for a highly competitive job and you meet your major competitor, who is a 55-year-old, before the the final interview.
10. You learn that there is competition for someone you want to date.	You learn that your competition for someone you want to date is 45-years-old.

Table 2 (cont.)

Means and Standard Deviations By Year, Form, and Gender
For SAS-A Situations

1988

*Item No.	Form A						Form B							
	Male		Female		Total		Male		Female		Total		Year Total	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1.	24.10	5.27	25.70	4.81	24.96	5.06	34.20	6.38	33.46	9.18	33.88	7.68	29.42	7.88
2.	24.81	5.65	26.65	5.34	25.81	5.53	30.98	7.19	34.67	6.54	32.59	7.11	29.20	7.21
3.	23.78	5.84	24.26	5.59	24.04	5.68	28.71	6.66	25.96	5.66	27.51	6.36	25.78	6.26
4.	23.54	4.75	25.54	4.95	24.62	5.68	23.80	5.68	24.08	6.36	23.92	5.94	24.27	5.45
5.	23.03	6.79	23.48	6.47	23.27	6.58	28.25	4.94	25.70	6.16	27.14	5.62	25.21	6.40
6.	24.56	5.36	23.28	7.86	23.87	6.65	29.39	4.77	31.93	6.76	30.50	5.93	27.18	7.10
7.	22.18	6.30	21.49	7.05	21.80	6.69	25.77	6.63	24.10	6.26	25.04	6.49	23.42	6.77
8.	37.51	5.73	38.30	5.89	37.94	5.80	35.92	5.49	34.83	5.70	35.46	5.57	36.69	5.81
9.	26.10	5.06	28.44	5.60	27.36	5.45	27.09	5.40	27.00	4.30	27.05	4.92	27.20	5.18
10.	35.74	6.70	36.11	6.47	35.94	6.47	35.03	7.27	34.02	7.45	34.59	7.32	35.26	6.93

* see Appendix for complete situations